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A Closer Look at the Missouri Civil War Campaign

by

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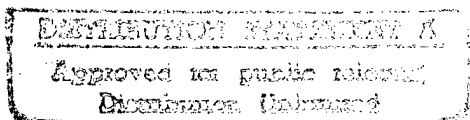
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Abstract of

A Closer Look at the Missouri Civil War Campaign

The importance of Missouri during the Civil War is often overlooked by historians. The state had abundant resources needed in the war effort as well as and a valuable strategic position as the westernmost border state. Possessing Missouri meant controlling the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, both key transportation waterways in the 1860's. The huge U. S. Arsenal at St. Louis and the will of the populace concerning secession were both important centers of gravity for the Unionists and the Secessionists. The first land battles of the Civil War were fought in Missouri. The political and military leaders were caught up in the emotionally charged atmosphere of the day and, as a result, made significant errors on the battlefield. Some of these conflicts were conducted without worthwhile or realistic objectives in mind. The troops on both sides in Missouri were untested in battle and were, for the most part, poorly trained. Although there were victories on both sides in Missouri, the State eventually became allied with the Union. However, the secessionist spirit remained alive in the State throughout the War and thousands of soldiers volunteered their services to the Confederacy. Important lessons were learned on clearly defining the objective, being decisive, using restraint, accurately assessing the strength of own and enemy forces, unity of command, unity of effort, and managing lines of communication.

A Closer Look at the Missouri Civil War Campaign

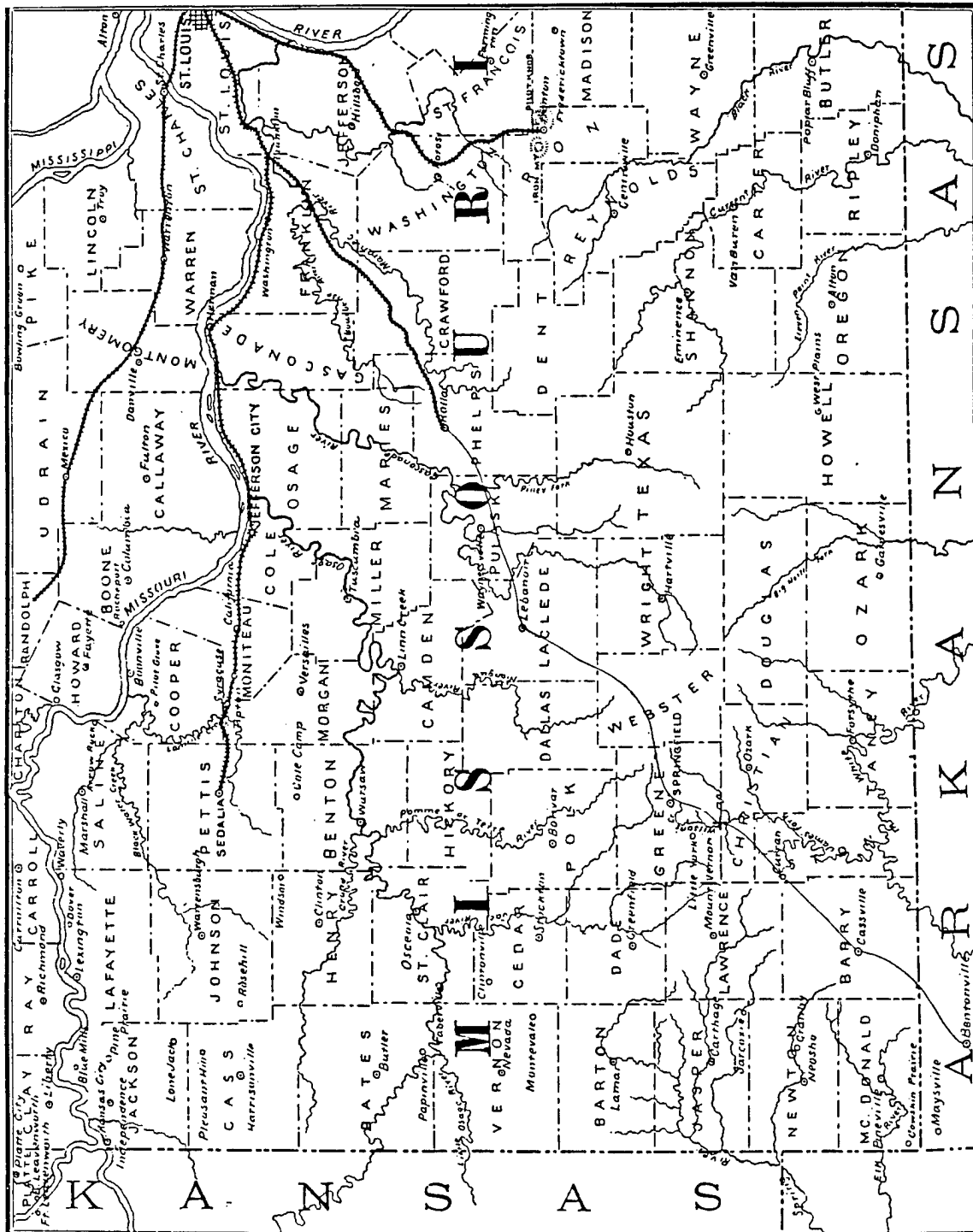
Political Landscape in 1861

In the early spring days of 1861, following the election of President Lincoln, the seven slave-holding states of the deep south seceded from the Union. These were Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. The remaining eight slave-holding states of the upper south were undecided on the issue of secession. These states included Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, and Delaware.¹ The military importance of these border states was critical not only because of their abundant resources and important geographic positions, but also because of the value in their various forts, armories and arsenals. Very delicate political gamesmanship was required by Presidents Lincoln and Davis to win the loyalty of the border states.

The Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in April polarized the Nation and signified the beginning of civil war. It had become nearly impossible to remain neutral in the conflict. Arkansas, Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee soon joined the Southern Cause while the State of West Virginia was conceived and, along with Delaware, allied themselves with the Union. Overall, this was a tremendous blow to Union strength. Only Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland remained as undecided slave-holding states. These three border states each represented critical objectives in holding sufficient Union strength to defeat the South.² Missouri, with its importance often overlooked by historians, was vital to the outcome of events as the North and South clashed.

Background of 19th Century Missouri

From a geographical perspective, Missouri occupied an extremely important strategic position. Being the westernmost border state, it offered control of the Missouri River which served as a highway to the west that connected Kansas and other areas with the east. If Missouri had become occupied by the Confederacy, Kansas would have been isolated from the Union. Also, with Missouri in the Confederacy, the Union's control of the all-important Mississippi River and its valley would have been much more difficult.³ The Mississippi River provided a natural avenue for invasions by Union forces southward that would lead the way toward



Source: Snead, Thomas L. The Fight for Missouri

victory. Missouri's position along the western border of Illinois would have made an ideal staging area for Confederate forces intent on invading Illinois. With Missouri bonded to the Confederacy, the South could have more effectively protected Kentucky and Tennessee through which the Union had to pass to reach the all-important Southern heartland."⁴

The great natural resources of the state offered critical advantages to her possessor. The large lead and zinc mines in Joplin and Carthage became the Union's principal sources for these vital war-fighting materials. Under Confederate control, the mines would have compensated desperate shortages experienced by the South. A sizable iron mining industry also existed. There were more horses and mules in Missouri than in any other southern state and the value of these animals to the armies on both sides was inestimable.⁵ The well-developed railroad system in the northern half of Missouri also offered a tremendous strategic advantage. By 1860, 810 miles of railroad track had been laid which connected several cities in north and north-central Missouri to St. Louis.⁶

Approximately 90% of Missouri's 1,182,012 inhabitants in 1860 lived on farms or in very small towns. About three-fourths of the state's population was of southern ancestry but only one out of eight families actually owned slaves.⁷ The Governor's office and state legislature in 1860 were controlled by the "Boonslick Democracy" who were affluent land-owners of the rich Missouri River valley and these affluent plantation owners had pro-slavery interests. Most of Missouri's population were for the Union but they were "Conditional Unionists" who believed in compromising with the South staunchly opposed any attempt by the North to coerce them back into the Union through the use of armed force.⁸

St. Louis, the only major city in the state, was rapidly becoming industrialized and had the third-fastest growth rate of all cities in the Union. This city produced two-thirds of the state's industrial output and its economy, especially dependent on the fast developing railroad system, was becoming closely tied to the northeast. Sixty percent of the population of St. Louis was foreign born, the highest of any city in the union, and nearly 60,000 of these were Germans who were unswerving Lincoln supporters.⁹ As new immigrants, their source of citizenship was the *United States* and it was to the cause of holding the Union together that they naturally gave their allegiance. They did not feel the State pride which a New Englander or South Carolinian may have felt and had trouble understanding that to a Virginian, loyalty and patriotism meant

devotion to The Old Dominion and not to the Union. They deplored slavery and, having no family or long-term acquaintances from the South, they felt no sense of duty to stand by them during their time of need.¹⁰ By 1861, the financial and industrial elite of St. Louis were becoming the new political force and their affiliations were increasingly associated with the northeast.¹¹ They were to become a most compelling force in the effort to keep Missouri with the Union.

The Arsenal at St. Louis

The St. Louis arsenal was the largest in the South and contained 60,000 muskets, ninety thousand pounds of powder, one and a half million rounds of small arms ammunition, forty field pieces, siege guns and extensive and well-equipped workshops for arms manufacturing and repair.¹² The arsenal was under the authority of General William S. Harney, Commander of the Department of the West. Harney was a Unionist who had married into an aristocratic family that supported secession. He was hopeful that a compromise on the issues could be reached and revolution could be avoided.¹³

U.S. Representative, Francis Preston Blair Jr. was a staunch Unionist who resided in St. Louis and had very strong political ties running directly to the President.¹⁴ Blair accurately assessed that the arsenal was vulnerable to attack by secessionist forces within the state and became active in bolstering its defense.

Pro-southern sentiment ran high in the State Capitol of Jefferson City and many believed that "according to the doctrine of state sovereignty, Missouri had the right to claim the arsenal since it rested upon her soil."¹⁵ On January 24, 1861 Governor Claiborne F. Jackson sent an envoy to visit the arsenal's commandant, Major William H. Bell. A graduate of West Point in 1820, Major Bell was originally from North Carolina but had spent many years stationed in St. Louis on ordnance duty. Because of his lengthy tour in Missouri and his southern heritage, he felt great loyalty to the State and to the South.¹⁶ The Governor's envoy was able to reach agreement with Bell to the effect that he would "not defend the arsenal if state authorities such as the governor determined to claim it." He also agreed that he would not remove munitions from the arsenal without first informing state officials.¹⁷ Although the State Legislature was unwilling to recommend secession, on January 29, they "adopted a set of resolutions that declared that if the federal government should attempt to coerce the South into rejoining the Union, Missouri would aid in resisting any attackers."¹⁸ This was not atypical of positions held by other border states.

The Arrival of Captain Nathaniel Lyon

U. S. Representative Frank Blair was deeply suspicious of Major Bell's allegiance and he wasted little time in using his political connections to successfully remove Bell from command. As his replacement, the Army chose Bvt. Maj. Peter V. Hagner to be in charge of ordnance.¹⁹ Then on February 7, in response to Blair's request for reinforcements, Captain Nathaniel Lyon with his company of eighty infantrymen arrived in St. Louis to buttress the weak defenses of the St. Louis Arsenal.²⁰ Capt. Lyon, a red-haired man of short stature and an even shorter temper was known for his explosive personality prone to occasional fits of rage.²¹ He had a reputation for being an unmerciful disciplinarian with a fanatical sense of duty.²² Lyon was a Unionist to the core and viewed that Institution as a sacred entity²³ and saw it as his duty not only to protect the city from the evil secessionists but also to severely punish the pro-southern forces for their treasonous acts.²⁴ In Lyon, Representative Blair saw an ally who shared his passionate convictions.²⁵ Upon arriving at the arsenal, Lyon immediately confronted Major Hagner about his brevet promotion and official date of rank, claiming his own right to command. Lyon petitioned every available channel to be placed in charge. By the fourth week of April, with the help of Frank Blair, Lyon was in command of the arsenal and was given authority to begin recruiting troops at St. Louis for the protection of public property. Frank Blair awarded Lyon with Missouri's single allotment of Brigadier Generalships to lead the Missouri Volunteers and was himself elected as colonel of the first of four regiments to be quickly formed. More than eighty percent of these ninety day volunteers were recruited from the pro-union German population of St. Louis.²⁶ On April 30, Lyon received an official War Department dispatch personally approved by the President. It gave him authority to recruit up to 10,000 volunteer troops for the purpose of maintaining Union authority and protecting the peaceful inhabitants of Missouri. He was also given discretion to enforce martial law in the city of St. Louis.²⁷

One of Lyon's first acts after being placed in charge of the arsenal was to transfer all non-essential munitions from the St. Louis arsenal into Illinois, a feat that he successfully pulled off without detection by the secessionist forces. This bold effort, conducted under the cover of darkness on April 26, employed decoy wagons to attract attention away from the actual shipment.²⁸ With his swift actions, Lyon displayed

decisiveness which Governor Jackson lacked. Had Jackson acted as decisively a short time earlier to claim the arsenal, it would have been an easy victory and probably would have changed the course of events in Missouri. But he waited too long and by so doing, lost for his cause the greatest arsenal in all of the southern and border states. For Lyon, the ordinance problem at the arsenal was resolved and he then turned his attention to the problem of the secessionists.

The Governor and Camp Jackson

Following the attack on Fort Sumter, President Abraham Lincoln requested 75,000 volunteer troops to combat the rebellion in the South. Governor Jackson's response to this request was, "Sir, . . . your requisition in my judgment, is illegal, unconstitutional and revolutionary in its object, inhuman and diabolical, and cannot be complied with. Not one man will the state of Missouri furnish to carry on such an unholy crusade."²⁹ The state legislature, opposed to the concept of using arms to coerce the South, fully backed the Governor's rebuke. On the other hand, the legislators still could not bring themselves to vote for secession.³⁰

Prior to Lyon's arrival at St. Louis, the Governor had been working covertly on a scheme for seceding the state and attacking the arsenal at St. Louis. This included corresponding with Confederate President Jefferson Davis and requesting his assistance in obtaining heavy armaments. In accordance with the Militia Act of 1858, Governor Jackson gave orders on April 22 for the state militia to report to their district camps on May 3. Although Lyon's action on April 26 to transfer the arsenal's munitions removed the Governor's objective, the militia were still ordered to assemble at Lindell Grove in St. Louis for training. The Governor felt that mustering the militia would provide a show of force that would deter the buildup of Lyon's forces in the city. In honor of the Governor, the troops chose 'Camp Jackson' as the name for their encampment of 892 men. On May 9th, in response to the Governor's request, President Davis shipped heavy cannon, shot and shell, mortars, muskets and ammunition taken from the captured arsenal at Baton Rouge.³¹

Placing the State Guard encampment in St. Louis was clearly intended by the Governor to serve as a deterrent strategy. This was an error in judgment on his part. According to Joint Publication 3-07, "Deterrence stems from the belief of a potential aggressor that a credible threat of retaliation exists, the contemplated action cannot succeed, or the costs outweigh any possible gains." While it may have been

logical to demonstrate that the state was opposed to the Union's apparent invasion of her territory, this message could probably have been communicated just as effectively through diplomatic or other channels. Using diplomatic means would also have allowed the State to arm, organize and train the militia at some other location and out of harm's way. The placement of the State's untrained militia within a half-hour march of Lyon's numerically superior force, as will be explained, proved folly. It failed to create the required beliefs in the opponent's mind that costs outweighed gains or that success was unlikely if an attack were attempted.

The Capture of Camp Jackson

Lyon viewed the encampment at Lindell Grove as a threat that required decisive action.

From a legal perspective, the Missouri militia was a lawfully organized body and had every right to be at Camp Jackson. To make matters worse, Lyon had only been given authority to impose martial law in St. Louis, not to wage offensive operations, especially against the legally assembled forces of the still-loyal State of Missouri. Lyon relied on his gut feelings in making a decision to capture the Camp. He carefully planned an attack on the encampment and shared his information with only four of his closest staff members to ensure the best chances of total surprise.³²

Considering that the six to seven thousand troops Lyon used to capture Camp Jackson were fresh volunteers untrained and untried in battle, the success of the operation was remarkable. The following quoted passage succinctly tells of the operation which occurred on May 10:

One of the most difficult maneuvers in military science is the coordination of separate forces that are moving on different paths yet are to reach the same destination at approximately the same time. Invariably there are delays or mistakes that confound even the most experienced commanders and troops, much less those who are completely green. Miraculously, though, at about 3:15 P.M. all seven columns arrived at Lindell Grove almost simultaneously and quickly surrounded it on three sides, in full view of the encampment.

Lyon had surprised the militia almost completely and gave the militia commander, General Frost, a half-hour to reply to his request for immediate surrender. In the end, not a shot was fired and the camp surrendered. That he was totally surprised is evident in General Frost's reply which read,

Sir - I never for a moment conceived the idea that illegal and unconstitutional demands as I have just received from you, would be made by an officer of the United States Army. I am wholly unprepared to defend my command from this unwarranted attack, and shall, therefore, be forced to comply with your demand.³³

Following the camp's capture, in what was to be a display of Union might, Lyon decided to march his 669 prisoners in two very long columns through the heart of the crowded city streets back to the arsenal. Many in the crowd were armed anti-unionists and jeered and insulted the German troops with shouts of "Damn the Dutch" and "Hurrah for Jeff Davis". After a time the columns were halted in the street and shortly thereafter the soldiers began to be pelted with rocks and other objects. Pushing and shoving eventually resulted in a civilian drawing a concealed gun and firing at the federal troops. The discipline of Lyon's green soldiers broke down and they began firing indiscriminately into the crowd. A total of twenty eight on-looking civilians were killed and as many as seventy-five were injured. Two federal soldiers and three prisoners were also killed with several others wounded. The St. Louis population, fearful of Lyons Germans, was thrown into panic and began fleeing the city by the thousands.³⁴

There were impromptu uprisings in many localities to avenge the 'wholesale slaughter of women and children.' The people were thrown into an unreasonable frenzy of state loyalty and non-Union sentiment. In fact the legislature and the people, both of which had been somewhat lukewarm to Jackson, became non-Unionist overnight.³⁵

That afternoon, after Governor Jackson broke the news of Camp Jackson to the Hall of Representatives, the Military Bill to arm the State passed through both houses in less than fifteen minutes. That night, in an emergency session, the legislature met and passed an act authorizing the Governor to take whatever measures necessary to suppress rebellion or repel invasion.³⁶

Lyon's capture of the encampment at Lindell Grove effectively employed the elements of surprise, security, unity of effort and mass to quickly overwhelm the militia and produce a bloodless surrender. However, regardless of how successful his execution of the tactic was, it cannot be ignored that he performed these actions without proper authority. Lyon's intended mission in St. Louis was one that in today's vernacular would be referred to as a military operation other than war (MOOTW). Lyon's task, as stated in Winfield Scott's dispatch from the War Department and approved personally by Lincoln, gave him authority to muster 10,000 troops to maintain the Union's authority and protect the inhabitants of Missouri. It also gave him permission, if he deemed it necessary, to enforce martial law in the city of St. Louis. The state legislature, although mixed in opinion about secession, was tilted in the direction of staying in the Union so long as coercive force wasn't used. In his zeal to punish the pro-secessionist militia forces, Lyon lost sight of his

objective which was to keep the peace and maintain Union authority. That he saw the encampment as a threat to the peace is arguable and may even be understandable given the circumstances immediately following the fall of Fort Sumter. But Lyon's choice to march the prisoners through the center of potentially hostile crowds enroute to the arsenal demonstrates that he lacked vision and astuteness as a military leader. Lyon's actions served to add fuel to the already kindled emotional fires raging in St. Louis over the issues of secession. By parading his captives through the public and thus producing a riotous outcome, he helped instigate rebellion that he would subsequently be commanded to quell.

Lyon had several options with his captives. Keeping the objective of protecting the population and keeping the peace in mind, a viable option may simply have been to confiscate the militia's weaponry and disperse them. Another option might have been to use the encampment as a holding area for the prisoners. This would have been especially effective given that the militia members were almost immediately released from the arsenal after administering verbal oaths to the enlisted men and a written oath to the officers. Had he done this, Lyon and the Union he represented would have been seen as a benevolent and legitimate force trying to oppose a wicked evil. Instead, Lyon demonstrated to the population of Missouri that the Union was more than willing to act as a coercive and hostile force. Instead of keeping peace, his actions lost legitimacy and resulted in unnecessary violence and chaos. From the very start, Lyon's personal convictions that the secessionists must be punished clouded his judgment and obscured the stated objective. He did more to galvanize Missouri's population against the Union with this single event than General Frost could have done in a year with his 892 men. This important lesson of keeping focused on the objective remains valuable with today's MOOTW operations.

Preparations for War

During the rest of May both sides in Missouri made preparations for war. Representative Blair and Lyon continued to train the German volunteers in St. Louis while the Governor's militia was surely but more slowly becoming armed and organized. The Governor divided the state into eight districts and appointed a brigadier general to each. In overall command of the militia, he appointed former governor Sterling Price with rank of Major General. Price had served in the Mexican War and was a most popular symbol of

leadership in Missouri. His decision to join with the southern cause following the Camp Jackson debacle did much to legitimize the state's effort and greatly enhanced the recruitment of volunteers.³⁷ General Harney, who privately believed that Lyon had acted too zealously in carrying out his responsibilities, was increasingly viewed by Blair and Lyon as too moderate on the issues and as interfering with their plans to overrun the state.³⁸ Blair and Lyon both worked to have him removed from his position as Commander of the Department of the West.³⁹ As a result, especially of Blair's political efforts, Winfield Scott approved orders on May 16th officially commissioning Lyon as a Brigadier General and giving Francis P. Blair discretion to remove General Harney from command. He soon acted on that discretion and on May 30th, Harney was relieved of command and Lyon officially accepted the position of Commander of the Department of the West.⁴⁰ With Blair and Lyon now in complete command, many conservatives expressed concern that their zealous policies would push the state toward secession and they urged Governor Jackson and General Price to meet with Blair and Lyon. On June 11th the anticipated conference took place in St. Louis. During the meeting, the Governor expressed his desire for a position of strict neutrality. As part of the deal, he would discontinue arming and organizing the militia and would prevent the Confederates from entering the state through Arkansas but he also insisted that Blair and Lyon disarm their Home Guard. After a long discussion, Lyon rejected the proposal and concluded the meeting by telling the Governor, "This means war". Before leaving the room, he informed Jackson and Price that his officers would conduct them safely through his lines in one hour.⁴¹

Civil War in Missouri

Governor Jackson and General Price took Lyon at his word that war was declared in their state and as they returned to Jefferson City that night, they burned the railroad bridges and cut telegraph cables behind them.⁴² Lyon immediately sent Generals Sweeney and Sigel with three thousand men southwest toward Springfield to intercept Jackson and Price. Sigel would form the southern portion of a pincer move against the militia with Lyon working the other side from the north. Their hope was to prevent any attempt by Jackson and Price to join up with Confederate General McCulloch, who was concentrated in Northwest Arkansas. By

June 15, Lyon with two thousand men were steaming up the Missouri River toward Jefferson City. When they got there, they found that General Price and the Governor had abandoned the capitol.

Feeling unprepared to make a defense of the Capitol, Jackson and Price took their three to four thousand poorly trained volunteers and retreated about 50 miles upriver to the town of Booneville. Not more than twelve hundred of their militia had arms of any kind and strong consideration was given to retreating further to buy time. Partly because of the eagerness of the militia troops to fight, the decision was made to defend Booneville.

Lyon's forces continued up the Missouri to a point about seven miles east of Booneville early in the morning on June 17th. The state troops had formed a line of battle about four miles east of the town as Lyon approached. The clash was brief with few casualties before discipline broke down among the state militia's line and they took flight. Of five men killed, three were federal troops and two were state militiamen.⁴³ "Civil War was now fairly inaugurated. Federal troops poured into the territory and, because of the dispersion of the main force, were temporarily able to overrun the state and prevent its secession from the Union by sheer military force."⁴⁴

The Battle of Booneville was the first land battle of the Civil War and like many of the early clashes during the long struggle for the Union, it reflected great amateurism and naiveté by many of the participants. Governor Jackson and Price were unwise to use their troops' eagerness to fight as a basis for deciding to resist the Lyon's force. They, in effect, handed the leader of the Federal forces a quick and decisive rout of the militia that did much to restore Lyon's credibility as a strong military leader. More importantly, on a national scale it was heralded as a great Union victory and had positive impact on morale in the northern states. For the State, the results of the battle had a very dampening effect on efforts to recruit forces not only because of its adverse effect on Confederate morale but also because it isolated Price from the northern and central part of the state where most of the population resided.⁴⁵ Most significant of all may be that it unseated the Governor from his position of power and legitimacy in Jefferson City. By gaining control of the Missouri River Lyon now controlled most of the state's population, infrastructure, agriculture, and wealth. Strategically, by controlling Jefferson City and the Missouri River line, the Union possessed everything it needed to keep Missouri from seceding and the south from invading northward. For reasons that seem more personal than

strategic, Lyon insisted on continuing his punitive crusade against the secessionists, a scheme that would prove costly.⁴⁶

Pursuing the secessionists into the wilds of Missouri would require a completely different provisioning of his forces than was required by Lyon to bring them up the River. Properly outfitting his forces for the overland march would take valuable time during which Jackson's and Price's forces were moving south in hopes of joining with Brigadier General McCulloch's Arkansas Command. As Lyon waited in Booneville for supplies, he could only hope that Sweeney and Sigel would be able to intercept the secessionists on their way south. Finally on July 3, with his force of two thousand three hundred and fifty well-armed, equipped and supplied men, Lyon headed south from Booneville. He had lost fifteen days at Booneville and the state militia were more than a week ahead of him.⁴⁷ By the night of July 4, Price and his escort had already gotten past Sigel's forces to meet with McCulloch in Arkansas. That same evening, the Governor, who was camped near the southwest Missouri town of Lamar, first learned that General Sigel was just south of their position with the intention of stopping their southward retreat. Federal plans for the pincer movement had failed and the following morning the two forces met on a prairie along Coon Creek near Carthage. In what became known as the Battle of Carthage, Sigel was forced into an orderly retreat and ultimately withdrew his forces to Springfield.⁴⁸ On July 6, the Governor and General Price joined their forces at Cowskin Prairie near Neosho in the southwestern corner of the State.

On July 13th, Lyon finally arrived in Springfield. Supplies for his forces were short, his troops were worn and needed clothing after the hard march from Booneville. With the ninety day enlistments almost up for nearly half his volunteers and with ten to twenty thousand secessionists reported south of Springfield, Lyon had reason to be worried.⁴⁹ The hard lessons involving extended lines of communication were about to begin.

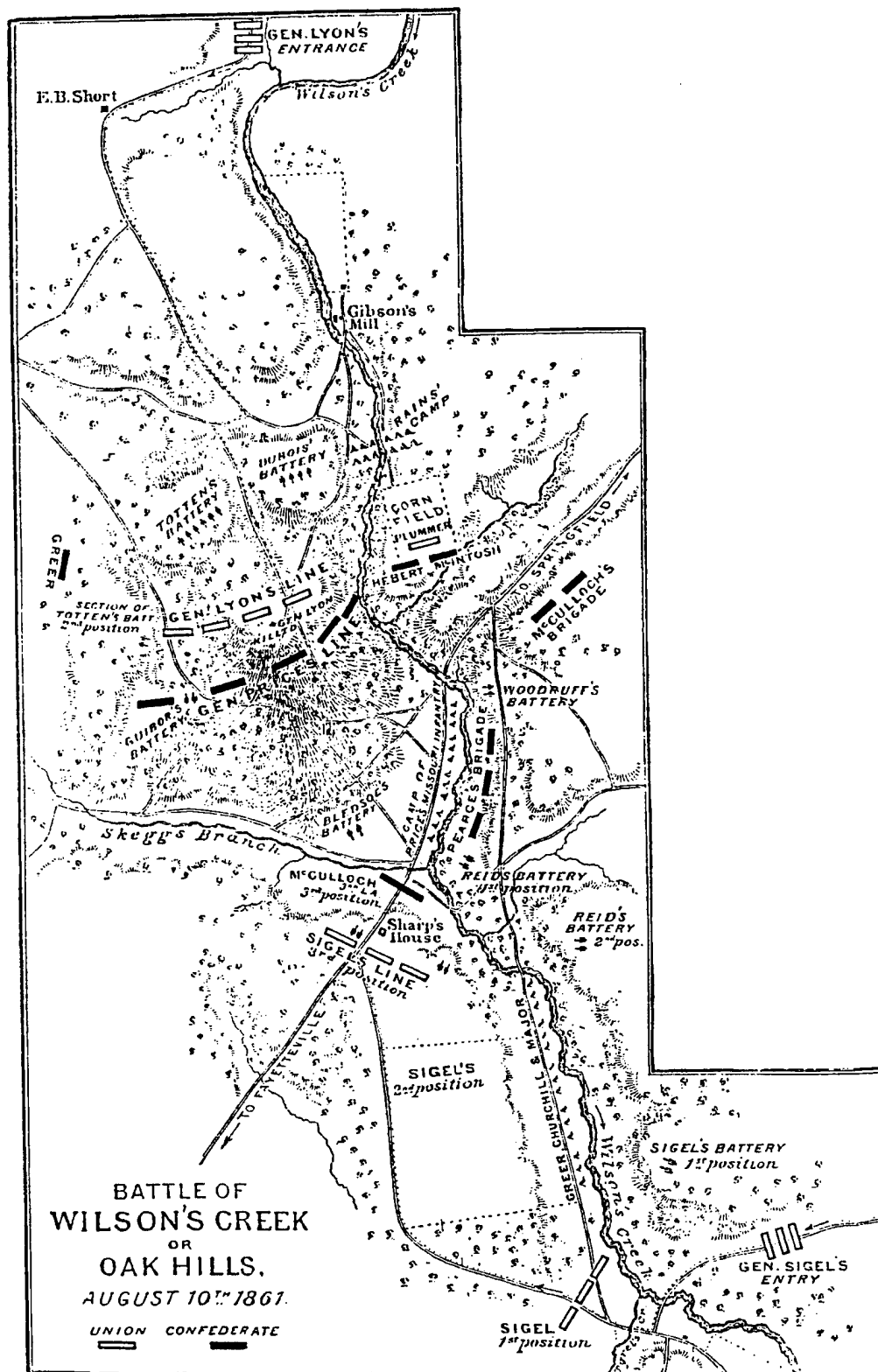
Although he was reluctant to do so, General McCulloch agreed to assist the Missouri State Guard with troops and ammunition. He designated the rendezvous point for all forces at Cassville, Missouri and by 29 July, all forces under Price, Jackson and the McCulloch were assembled. Of the 9,000 - 10,000 troops in Price's camp, McCulloch estimated that the effective force, mostly armed with shotguns and common rifles, would barely total 7,000. On July 30, McCulloch wrote to Secretary of War Walker of his plans to move toward Springfield with the approximately 12,700 Confederates camped around Cassville. Since many of the

men from General Rains' Eighth Division of the Missouri State Guard were familiar with the area, they spearheaded the march toward Springfield along telegraph road.⁵⁰ The forces ultimately formed an encampment at a place about ten miles southwest of Springfield where the road forded Wilson's Creek.⁵¹ While on the road, discussions between Price and McCulloch had continued and they finally agreed that the Arkansas General would be in overall command of the forces.⁵² Though this decision was difficult to reach, it had the important effect of creating unity of command for the coalition of state forces.

Culmination of Lyon's Forces

During the interim between his departure from St. Louis and his arrival at Springfield, Lyon's Department of the West had been reorganized and Missouri was placed under Major General George B. McClellan's Military Department of Ohio. McClellan, already task-saturated with other problems, delegated the authority back to Lyon with no real consequence on Lyon's unity of effort in his campaign against the secessionists.⁵³ By July 3, Frank Blair and his brother Montgomery had succeeded in convincing Winfield Scott and President Lincoln to reinstate the Department of the West, inclusive of Missouri. General Lyon, because of his harsh personality and sometimes rash behavior, was not reinstated as its commander. For the new position, the Blairs chose Major General John C. Fremont to head up the Department, a decision which would seriously affect Lyon's capabilities to wage war on the secessionists in southwest Missouri.⁵⁴ Lyon now had to send his requests for troop reinforcements to General Fremont who did not consider Lyon's situation in southwest Missouri to be quite as critical as Lyon claimed. Fremont refused to release additional troops to Lyon. Lyon was stuck with his fatigued and poorly supplied forces and was faced with the realization that retreat from Springfield would be necessary. His plan before retreating however, was to first strike the Rebels in an effort to throw them into confusion, thus hindering their efforts to effectively attack his retreating forces.⁵⁵ Once again, Lyon's vision was clouded by his desire to punish the secessionists.

Military intelligence was scant and imperfect on both sides. Lyon was informed that the Rebel forces numbered as many as twenty thousand and were growing stronger each day.⁵⁶ General McCulloch found it almost impossible to get information about Lyon's forces but at one point received word that Lyon was concerned about being attacked and was making preparations for abandoning Springfield.⁵⁷ Neither of these



Source: Bearss, Edwin C. The Battle of Wilson's Creek

situations were totally accurate but both were also partially true. McCulloch's imperfect intelligence reports left him more complacent than he should have been in view of Lyon's next action.

On the morning of August 10, Lyon effected total surprise with his southward advance against the Rebel forces who had withdrawn their pickets at midnight.⁵⁸ McCulloch, initially disbelieving reports of attack, slowly organized his forces to defend against Lyon. The ensuing confrontation, now known as the Battle of Wilson's Creek, lasted six and a half hours during which General Lyon was fatally wounded.⁵⁹ At high cost to both sides, Federal forces were driven from the field. Federal casualties were 1317 with Confederate casualties totaling 1230. The Confederates captured five artillery pieces and numerous stands of small arms.⁶⁰

Lyon's defeat was one of the last Civil War battles waged in the State of Missouri.⁶¹ Although Price soon gathered a force of ten thousand secessionists and forced the surrender of a Union garrison at the town of Lexington on the Missouri River, the hoped for rebellion never occurred. Governor Jackson, considering himself the legally elected representative of Missouri Government, convened the General Assembly in accordance with his proclamation on October 21, 1861. The result of this and subsequent meetings was that Missouri passed an ordinance of secession, which the Confederate Government considered legal and on November 28, President Davis declared Missouri the twelfth Confederate State.⁶² From the Union perspective, the legitimate government resided at the capitol in Jefferson City and was loyal to the Northern cause. This unique situation where a government in exile existed along with the lawful government in Jefferson City lasted throughout the War. Missouri contributed over a hundred and nine thousand men to the Union Army and nearly forty thousand to the Confederacy.⁶³

Summary and Lessons Learned

The importance of Missouri during the Civil War is often overlooked by historians because most of the bloody battles of America's fratricidal conflict were fought elsewhere. The Confederate leaders were slow to realize just how valuable the State could be in their plans to defend the South. Governor Jackson, despite his expertise on the State, was too hesitant to take decisive action. U. S. Representative Frank Blair and Captain Nathaniel Lyon, on the other hand, fully understood that it was critical to secure Missouri for the Union and their actions, though overly zealous, reflected that knowledge.

The Missouri population's allegiance to the Union was a strategic center of gravity following the fall of Fort Sumter. Lyon failed to understand this important fact and nearly lost the cause with his imprudent actions following the capture of State Troops at Camp Jackson.

The highly emotional and polarized atmosphere that existed in the border states at the time of Lincoln's presidency should be understood and compared with modern day scenarios where civil unrest prevails and political conditions hang in the balance. Military leaders can benefit by knowing how Lyon lost sight of his objective and decided to march his prisoners through crowded civilian streets, subsequently losing control of his men and the situation

The St. Louis Arsenal was the operational center of gravity that held the quick infusion of warfighting munitions so badly needed on the secessionist side. Lyon was wise to protect it as he did. The Governor lost his chance to properly arm his force in not taking the arsenal while time was on his side and the arsenal was vulnerable.

The importance of thoroughly planning each operation and carefully choosing objectives provides the operational leader with a blueprint for gauging success. Lyon failed to conclude that the important overall objectives in Missouri were defending the arsenal and taking control of the developed portions of the State using as little force as necessary. By the time he reached Booneville, he had accomplished all of this and should have declared victory in keeping Missouri in the Union. His great chase of the secessionist forces across the woodlands of southern Missouri was costly and gained nothing for the North.

Accurately assessing one's own readiness in terms of troop strength, training and equipment is as critical now as it was then. Governor Jackson and General Price at Booneville both knew that their men were not yet prepared to fight. Lyon knew at Springfield that his forces were too weakened to lead a successful attack against McCulloch. In both cases, defense or attack was chosen when retreat and/or delay would have been more prudent battlefield tactics.

Missouri was truly on the edge of secession in the spring of 1861. Despite the mistakes made, the actions of Lyon and his men made a tremendous difference in the outcome of the Civil War. If Lyon had not acted as decisively as he did, the South may very well have claimed the arsenal and shortly thereafter, the State. With this done, the Confederacy would have gained a critical strength in terms of warfighting

capability and territorial advantage which would probably have changed the outcome of the War. But that is not the way it happened; the operational decisions made by the red-haired General with a fiery temper made all the difference.

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Notes

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- 1 McPherson, 236.
 - 2 Ibid., 276-307.
 - 3 Barnes, 607.
 - 4 Tucker, xvii.
 - 5 Barnes, 607.
 - 6 Fellman, 8.
 - 7 Ibid., 7.
 - 8 Ibid., 5.
 - 9 Ibid., 8.
 - 10 Snead, 65.
 - 11 Fellman, 10.
 - 12 Snead, 100 & Nichols, 138.
 - 13 Phillips, 150.
 - 14 Mcpherson, 290.
 - 15 Phillips, 140.
 - 16 Snead, 101.
 - 17 Phillips, 140.
 - 18 Ibid., 139.
 - 19 Ibid., 140.
 - 20 Ibid., 129-130.
 - 21 Ibid., 14, 22, 87, 91, 98.
 - 22 Ibid., 87, 122.
 - 23 Ibid., 106-107.
 - 24 Ibid., 169.
 - 25 Ibid., 144.
 - 26 Ibid., 165.
 - 27 Ibid., 168.
 - 28 Ibid., 166.
 - 29 Ibid., 156.
 - 30 Ibid., 177.
 - 31 Ibid., 177-181.
 - 32 Ibid., 179-181.
 - 33 Ibid., 187-189.
 - 34 Ibid., 191-193.
 - 35 Barnes, 603.
 - 36 Snead, 172-173.
 - 37 Snead, 183.
 - 38 Phillips, 196.
 - 39 Snead, 188-189.
 - 40 Phillips, 208-209.
 - 41 Ibid., 213-214.
 - 42 Barnes, 604.
 - 43 Ibid., 605.
 - 44 Ibid., 606.
 - 45 Ibid., 606.
 - 46 Phillips, 222.
 - 47 Snead, 222.
 - 48 Ibid., 226-227.
 - 49 Phillips, 231.
 - 50 Bearss, 20-21.
 - 51 Ibid., 34.

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- ⁵² Ibid., 32.
⁵³ Phillips, 224.
⁵⁴ Ibid., 228.
⁵⁵ Bearss, 44-46.
⁵⁶ Phillips, 231.
⁵⁷ Bearss, 37-38.
⁵⁸ Snead, 268.
⁵⁹ Bearss, 132.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 136-137.
⁶¹ Phillips, 262.
⁶² Kirkpatrick, 378-385.
⁶³ Roed, 422-423.